

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 12 | Issue 1

Article 13

1-1-1995

Brummer, SPEAKING OF A PERSONAL GOD: AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

John Greco

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Greco, John (1995) "Brummer, SPEAKING OF A PERSONAL GOD: AN ESSAY IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol12/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

his true nature to us and teaches us the (occasionally hard) lessons we need to learn as we travel the road to redemption.

For these reasons (and others), I find Wall's conception of hell unconvincing. But I am pleased to recommend his book nonetheless. For it is a thoughtful discussion of a difficult topic, a valuable review of some important arguments, and a genuine source of insight.

NOTES

1. I have set forth my reasons for believing this in "Punishment, Forgiveness, and Divine Justice," *Religious Studies*, vol. 29 (June, 1993), pp. 151-68.

2. I defend this claim in an unpublished paper, "Three Pictures of God in Western Theology," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 12 (1995), pp. 77-94.

Speaking of A Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology, by **Vincent Brummer**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. ix and 160. \$44.95 (Cloth), \$14.95 (Paper).

JOHN GRECO, Fordham University

The main thesis of Vincent Brummer's book is that philosophical theology has an essential contribution to make to the theological quest of faith seeking understanding. In the first two chapters of the book Brummer clarifies this thesis and defends it against the objection that philosophical methodology is inappropriate for the subject matter of theology. In the remaining chapters Brummer attempts to illustrate the merits of philosophical theology via an investigation of the conceptually thorny claim that human beings can be in a personal relationship with God. In these chapters Brummer investigates the Reformed doctrine of grace, the ability of God to do evil, the intelligibility of double agency, and the possibility of a consoling and morally sensitive theodicy. The book ends with an epilogue in which Brummer summarizes his conclusions regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology. The book is persuasively argued, and almost always a model of clarity. Whether one is interested in the methodological or the substantive issues treated here, Brummer's book will be found interesting and worthwhile.

As I have said Brummer treats a wide range of material, but in this review I will restrict myself to two main issues. First, I will discuss Brummer's view of the nature of philosophical theology and its relation to theological inquiry in general, and I will try to resolve what might seem to be an inconsistency in Brummer's view of what philosophical theology is. Second, I will briefly summarize Brummer's conclusions regarding talk about a personal God, and I will argue that Brummer's attempt to provide a morally sensitive theodicy fails.

The Nature and Role of Philosophical Theology

According to Brummer philosophy has been traditionally conceived as providing epistemic justifications. On this conception philosophy in general provides foundations, and philosophical theology provides foundations or justifications for our religious beliefs. But such a conception puts philosophy at odds with theology. The philosopher demands kinds of justifications that cannot be given, and judges faith to be inappropriate as a result. On the other hand, the theologian insists that it is the philosopher's demands that are inappropriate, and judges philosophy irrelevant as a result. But philosophy and theology need not be at odds, Brummer argues, for there is a way of conceiving philosophy on which philosophy contributes to theology rather than opposes it. Brummer has in mind the model of philosophy as conceptual recollection, and argues that this model is to be found in the traditions of Plato, Wittgenstein and Gadamer. More specifically, each of these thinkers considers philosophy to be a kind of remembering what we already know. And for each the purpose of such remembering is two-fold; philosophy has a constructive use in supplying insight or knowledge, and it has a therapeutic use in helping us to sort out conceptual dilemmas and mistakes in our thinking.

But in what sense does philosophy allow us to remember what we already know? For all of these philosophers this is so in at least the metaphorical sense that philosophical reflection makes known explicitly what was previously known only implicitly. Brummer uses an example to illustrate the point. Native speakers can speak grammatically, and so in a sense they know the rules that govern the grammar of their own language. Yet such speakers need not have any explicit knowledge of these grammatical rules. But although such explicit knowledge is often lacking, having it can be helpful. For example an explicit knowledge of grammar can help us to recognize mistakes, and can help clarify what we should say in hard cases. And now similar things can be said about the concepts we employ in language and thought. Although we know how to use our language and employ its concepts, this is very different from having an explicit knowledge of how our concepts work and how they are related. Philosophical investigation is supposed to yield such knowledge, and as a result it can be helpful in clarifying our thought and resolving dilemmas and paradoxes which arise therein.

Whose concepts are the objects of philosophical reflection, and to what extent is such reflection innovative and not merely descriptive? According to Brummer, the philosopher does not analyze only her own concepts, but *possible* conceptual forms as well. "Hence philosophical reflection is not merely an exercise in recollection, but also, as Husserl tells us, an exercise in imagination as well." (p. 19) Also, philosophical reflection is innovative and not merely descriptive, aiming to produce conceptual forms which are preferable to those we already employ.

Brummer argues that when philosophy is understood as conceptual recollection, it is no longer at odds with theology but is rather an essential part of it. "The task of philosophical theology is not to provide proofs of the truth (or falsity) of the Christian faith. . . . Instead the philosophical theologian asks semantic and hermeneutical questions about the meaning and interpretations of the faith: what are the implications and presuppositions of the fundamental concepts of the faith, and how could the claims of the faith be interpreted in a coherent and relevant way? In this sense philosophical theology has an essential contribution to make in the theological quest of faith seeking understanding." (p. 2)

More specifically, the role of philosophy in theology is to develop consistent and coherent conceptual forms, and to investigate the relationships of these forms to other beliefs that we hold dear. Accordingly, Brummer places philosophical theology at the first of three levels of theological inquiry. At the first and most general level of reflection philosophical theology develops and interprets conceptual forms and determines which conceptual forms can be accepted without contradiction. The next level is confessional theology or church dogmatics, which uses confessional criteria to determine which conceptual forms can be accepted without becoming untrue to the community of faith or the religious tradition. The third level of reflection is that of personal faith. Here the individual must determine for herself which conceptual forms she can accept without losing her integrity.

It is not obvious how to interpret Brummer here, for there at least seems to be a contradiction in the conception of philosophical theology presented above. On the one hand Brummer says that philosophical theology operates only at the most general level, trying to determine "which conceptual forms can be accepted without contradiction" (p.28), and that the philosophical theologian "limits him-or herself to applying general logical criteria rather than the criteria of a specific confessional community...." (p.30) On the other hand, there are places where Brummer says that philosophical theology includes consideration of the commitments of confessional theology and personal faith. "Hence the reflection practised by the philosophical theologian includes an inquiry . . . into the conceptual grammar of specific views of life. . . ." (p. 30) And ". . . in the final analysis the philosophical theologian cannot be satisfied with reflection on abstract conceptual possibilities, but must seek to understand those possibilities which he or she can make his or her own with integrity. (p. 31) Thus Brummer seems to say that philosophical theology does and does not consider the commitments of particular communities and persons.

I think we can resolve the seeming contradiction if we make note of two points. First, Brummer makes a distinction between analyzing the relations among different commitments and affirming any of those commitments.

Thus I can investigate what are the logical entailments of a set of assumptions without accepting that the assumptions are true. If we keep this distinction in mind, then we can see that philosophical theology involves the consideration of particular commitments in the first sense but not in the second.

Second, the distinction that Brummer is making between philosophical theology and other levels of theological reflection is conceptual as opposed to temporal. Thus it is not that we first do philosophical theology and then at a later time move on to other levels of reflection. Rather, a person does philosophical theology at the same time that she engages in the other levels of theological reflection. Clarified in this way, Brummer's thesis is that the general theological activity of faith seeking understanding *involves* philosophical theology as one of its essential dimensions, but not as a separate step or in isolation from other forms of theological reflection.

Speaking of a Personal God

We may now turn to the second part of the book, where Brummer illustrates the merits of philosophical theology by applying it to some specific theological problems. All of the problems arise from speaking of a personal God or, more specifically, from affirming that humans can be involved in a personal relationship with God. The idea here is that this way of thinking about our relationship to God raises a variety of difficult conceptual problems. But since the nature of these problems is conceptual, philosophical theology defined as conceptual analysis and innovation has an essential role to play in resolving these problems.

To address the problem whether humans can resist the grace of God, Brummer distinguishes among conceptual, factual, normative and rational possibility. He then argues that such a conceptual framework allows us to give a coherent formulation of the Reformed doctrine of grace. Next Brummer turns to the question of whether God's freedom and omnipotence contradict the doctrine of divine impeccability. Making use of some further modal analysis and distinguishing free dispositions from necessitating causes, Brummer argues that for believers it is theologically necessary (*de dicto*) that Yahweh cannot sin (*de re*) in the sense that He is perfectly and freely disposed this way. Next Brummer tries to make sense of the doctrine of double agency, or the claim that God acts through created persons. Here he develops a pragmatic conception of causation in which "X is the cause of Y" entails that, for our purposes, X's occurring is an important and necessary part of the sufficient conditions for Y's occurring. In this way it makes sense to attribute certain human actions to God, since we can say that God caused the action in the sense of providing the most important of the necessary conditions for the action's occurring. But we do not thereby deny human agency, since we can consistently maintain that the free decision of the human agent is also a necessary condition of the action's occurring.

The final problem that Brummer considers is the possibility of a morally sensitive and therefore consoling theodicy. Here the issue is whether theodicies such as the free will defense must always be morally insensitive. But Brummer seems to confuse two senses in which the free will defense might be charged with insensitivity. First, the problem might be that *expressing* the free will defense is morally insensitive to those who suffer. "[A]rguments like the free will defense usually fail to offer any consolation to the afflicted. On the contrary, such theodicy arguments are often experienced as morally insensitive by those who suffer." (p.129-130) But second, the charge might be that such a defense entails that *God* is morally insensitive, since such a defense implies that God does not appropriately respond to the suffering of his people. "In fact, do arguments like the free will defence not conflict with the claim that God is a God of love. . .?" (p. 130)

But whether the charge of moral insensitivity is directed at the theologian or her God, it is not clear how Brummer's suggestions are supposed to solve the problem being raised. His strategy is to show that the free will defense is entailed by the fact that God is a God of love. The main idea is that entering into a loving relationship entails making oneself vulnerable to the beloved, and excludes forcing an affirmative response from the beloved. "In other words, if God did not grant us the ability to sin and cause affliction to him and to one another, we would not have the kind of free and autonomous existence necessary to enter into a relation of love with God and with one another. . . ." (p. 144)

Fair enough, but how is this supposed to help? If the issue is whether expressions of the free will defense can be consoling to the afflicted, I do not see that Brummer's suggestion is relevant. As Brummer recognizes himself, whether a person is consolable will depend on factors external to the content of the free will defense. Second, why think that expressions of the free will defense *should* be consoling to the afflicted? Such a stance seems to misunderstand the purpose of the free will defense, confusing pastoral issues with philosophical ones.

One might conclude that Brummer is really concerned with the second version of the charge of moral insensitivity, i.e. that the free will defense invokes a morally insensitive God. But Brummer's suggestions do not seem to answer this version of the charge either. The objection that Brummer thought compelling against Swinburne's version of the free will defense was that freedom, responsibility and the goods that come with them are bought at too high a price. Such things are valuable but not so valuable as to justify the amount of pain and suffering that we find in the world. But there will be an analogous response to Brummer's version of the free will defense. Namely, the good of God's love does not justify the evil that comes with it any more than the kinds of goods that Swinburne invokes.

Brummer's response here is that being in a loving relationship with God is not merely one good among others, but is the highest good for human beings. Thus he advocates an Augustinian eudaimonism in which the promotion of happiness is valued over the prevention of suffering. But here Brummer sets up a false dilemma. God need not choose between the prevention of suffering and the promotion of love, since both these values can be cultivated together.

The analogy to earthly parents is helpful here. Suppose that a mother considers familial love to be the highest good for herself and her children. For this reason she makes herself vulnerable in the ways required for the possibility of such a relationship. But she ought not to do so at just any cost! Suppose that one of her children persists in doing great harm to his siblings. Surely there are cases where a mother ought to withdraw the vulnerability required for a loving relationship, if only to protect her other children. My point here is not that Brummer's theodicy must fail, or even that objections along the above lines are ultimately valid. Rather, the point is that Brummer's version of the free will defense does not represent an advance against the charge of moral insensitivity. This is because, at least on that point, Brummer's version succeeds or fails to the same extent that Swinburne's does.*

*I would like to thank Brian Leftow, Mark Massa and Merold Westphal for their comments.